

## NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE

### CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD

# GRASSED WATERWAY

(Acre)

CODE 412

#### DEFINITION

A natural or constructed channel that is shaped or graded to required dimensions and established with suitable vegetation.

#### PURPOSES

This practice may be applied as part of a conservation management system to support one or more of the following purposes:

- to convey runoff from terraces, diversions, or other water concentrations without causing erosion or flooding
- to reduce gully erosion
- to protect/improve water quality.

#### CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

In areas where added water conveyance capacity and vegetative protection are needed to control erosion resulting from concentrated runoff and where such control can be achieved by using this practice alone or combined with other conservation practices.

#### CRITERIA

**General.** Grassed waterways shall be planned, designed, and constructed to comply with all Federal, State, and local laws and regulations.

**Capacity.** The minimum capacity shall be that required to convey the peak runoff expected from a storm of 10-year frequency, 24-hour duration. When the waterway slope is less than one percent, out-of-bank flow may be permitted if such flow will not cause excessive erosion. The minimum in such cases shall be the

capacity required to remove the water before crops are damaged.

**Velocity.** Design velocities shall not exceed those obtained by using the procedures, "n" values, and recommendations in the NRCS Engineering Field Handbook (EFH) Part 650, Chapter 7, or Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Agricultural Handbook 667, Stability Design of Grass-lined Open Channels.

**Width.** The bottom width of trapezoidal waterways shall not exceed 100 feet unless multiple or divided waterways or other means are provided to control meandering of low flows.

**Side Slopes.** Side slopes shall not be steeper than a ratio of two horizontal to one vertical. They shall be designed to accommodate the equipment anticipated to be used for maintenance and tillage/harvesting equipment that will cross the waterway.

**Depth.** The minimum depth of a waterway that receives water from terraces, diversions, or other tributary channels shall be that required to keep the design water surface elevation at, or below the design water surface elevation in the tributary channel, at their junction when both are flowing at design depth.

Freeboard above the designed depth shall be provided when flow must be contained to prevent damage. Freeboard shall be provided above the designed depth when the vegetation has the maximum expected retardance.

Conservation practice standards are reviewed, and updated if needed. To obtain the current version of this standard, contact the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

**Drainage.** Designs for sites having prolonged flows, a high water table, or seepage problems shall include Subsurface Drains (NRCS Practice Code 606), Underground Outlets (NRCS Practice Code 620), Stone Center Waterways or other suitable measures to avoid saturated conditions. [Drainage system shall comply with all federal, state, and local wetland laws and regulations.](#)

**Outlets.** All grassed waterways shall have a stable outlet with adequate capacity to prevent [downstream erosion](#), ponding or flooding damages. The outlet can be another vegetated channel, an earthen ditch, a grade-stabilization structure, filter strip or other suitable outlet.

**Vegetative Establishment.** Grassed waterways shall be vegetated according to NRCS Conservation Practice Standard Critical Area Planting, Code 342.

[When cuts are expected to exceed six inches, topsoil shall be saved to spread on the newly constructed waterway to facilitate the establishment of vegetative cover. Where this is done the waterway shall be over excavated to allow for placement of topsoil without encroaching on the design cross section.](#)

Seedbed preparation, time of seeding, mixture rate, stabilizing crop, mulching, or mechanical means of stabilizing, fertilizer, and lime requirements shall be specified for each applicable area.

Establish vegetation as soon as conditions permit. Use mulch anchoring, nurse crop, rock, straw or hay bale dikes, filter fences, or runoff diversion to protect the vegetation until it is established. [In waterways with design flow velocities greater than 3.0 feet per second, the flow of water shall be diverted around or away from the waterway until the vegetation is established.](#)

## CONSIDERATIONS

Important wildlife habitat, such as woody cover or wetlands, should be avoided or protected if possible when siting the grassed waterway. If trees and shrubs are incorporated, they should be retained or planted in the periphery of grassed waterways so they do not interfere with hydraulic functions. Mid- or tall bunch grasses and perennial forbs may also be

planted along waterway margins to improve wildlife habitat. Waterways with these wildlife features are more beneficial when connecting other habitat types; e.g., riparian areas, wooded tracts and wetlands.

Water-tolerant vegetation may be an alternative on some wet sites [if the vegetation can be harvested during dry periods.](#)

Use irrigation in dry regions or supplemental irrigation as necessary to promote germination and vegetation establishment.

Provide livestock and vehicular crossings as necessary to prevent damage to the waterway and its vegetation.

Establish filter strips on each side of the waterway to improve water quality.

Add width of appropriate vegetation to the sides of the waterway for wildlife habitat.

## PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Plans and specifications for grassed waterways shall be in keeping with this standard and shall describe the requirements for applying the practice to achieve its intended purpose(s).

## OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

An operation and maintenance (O&M) plan shall be provided to and reviewed with the landowner. [The landowner shall sign the O&M plan to indicate an understanding of the requirements and commitment to operate and maintain this practice as specified.](#) The plan shall include the following items and others as appropriate.

A maintenance program shall be established to maintain waterway capacity, vegetative cover, and outlet stability. Vegetation damaged by machinery, herbicides, or erosion must be repaired promptly.

[The primary seeding shall be inspected for at least two years after construction, after spring runoff, and after heavy rainfall events. Reinforcement grass seeding and mulching shall be conducted when existing stands are less than ten plants per square foot. Lime and fertilizer shall also be applied with reinforcement seeding. During the first two](#)

springs following establishment, topdress with a minimum of 300 lbs. of 10-10-10 fertilizer. Check pH, and apply lime according to soil test recommendations.

A six-inch above ground plant stubble shall be maintained after the final forage harvest operation.

Seeding shall be protected from concentrated flow and grazing until vegetation is established.

Minimize damage to vegetation by excluding livestock whenever possible, especially during wet periods.

Inspect grassed waterways regularly, especially following heavy rains. Damaged areas will be filled, compacted, and seeded immediately. Remove sediment deposits to maintain capacity of grassed waterway.

Landowners should be advised to avoid areas where forbs have been established when applying herbicides. Avoid using waterways as turn-rows during tillage and cultivation operations. Prescribed burning and mowing may be appropriate to enhance wildlife values, but must be conducted to avoid peak nesting seasons and reduced winter cover.

Mow or periodically graze vegetation to maintain capacity and reduce sediment deposition. [Mowing should be completed after August 15<sup>th</sup> to allow nesting birds to leave.](#)

Control noxious weeds.

Do not use as a field road. Avoid crossing with heavy equipment when wet.